

Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

The culture of Cultural Studies: accommodating the latecomer

Dr Vlastimir Sudar, Associate Lecturer, Cultural and Historical Studies, London College of Fashion

Abstract

There is a tendency amongst students in art and design education to perceive Cultural and Historical Studies as a subject marginal to their practice, and therefore their learning experience. This essay attempts an ethnographic analysis of whether this is the case on the BA (Hons) Fashion Photography course at London College of Fashion. The research aim was to identify strategies that might improve the status of the often dreaded Cultural and Historical Studies component.

Keywords

theory, cultural studies, fashion photography

Art and design education emerged from the need to enable people to develop skills in conceiving and producing artefacts of the broadest kind. Economically, this was initially tied to a range of artisanal production, so it is no wonder that a number of art and design colleges in the UK have their roots in what were once schools for specific crafts (MacDonald, 2004). Even at a brief glance, this is the case in institutions that today constitute the University of the Arts London, where the research in this paper was conducted. It is telling that today's London College of Fashion has its roots in embroidery and millinery (UAL, 2016b), while the schools that combined to form what is now known as Central Saint Martins were once dedicated to arts and crafts (UAL, 2016a). If we observe the histories of these institutions more closely – something upon which they pride themselves on their websites – the now quaint and romantic image of tutors as masters with students as their apprentices, working in small workshops, is not such a distant past. Since the late 1970s there has been a progressive acceleration – due to various educational, social, political and economic reasons – and the notion of the small studio with a craftsman and apprentice has given way to more complex and larger scale modes of teaching art and design.

The new modes of art and design education that have emerged in recent decades have needed to conform to more traditional standards associated with awarding 'degrees', which required transformation of the overall curricula and inevitably has led to the inclusion of more conventional academic training and exams. If we take almost any art and design degree offered at the University of the Arts, its programme is usually split into two major components. The first one is practical training in the chosen discipline or subject area, which historically goes back to the small studio workshops used at the inception of this type of training and education. The second component consists of 'Cultural and Historical Studies', or 'Contextual and Theoretical Studies' as they are also known, which is a later addition to these programmes. This second component is mainly taught in a traditional academic fashion that

requires students to study – or read – the history and theory of their subject together with wider culture. Students pass units by producing written assignments. It is through the addition of such theoretical components that most of these courses have been re-validated and upgraded, becoming awarded degrees that conform to higher academic levels. This academicisation was a result of the two so-called ‘Coldstream Reports’, one from 1960 and another from 1970, instigated by the National Advisory Council on Art Education, chaired by William Coldstream (Kill, 2005), which can be said to have initiated significant changes to degree structures. ‘Cultural Studies’ is thus a relative latecomer discipline, whose accommodation in the overall programme and culture of art and design has not always been easy.

As Cultural and Historical Studies have been added to a number of courses at a later stage in the development of art and design education, they are often taught by separate departments in institutions across the UK (even in large institutions); removed from more traditional subject areas. As well as Cultural Studies often being physically removed as a department, its form of teaching is traditionally classroom-based and its content theoretical, rather than practical. The ‘latecomer’ is in a vividly separated, alien position and most students consequently perceive it as such, as the interviewees in this study attest.

Cultural and Historical Studies are often understood as an intruder within the romantic image of an arts and crafts workshop, an unnecessary addition that brings foreign and theoretical content into what usually remains an intuitively-led space of hands-on production. Although historical examples exist, indicating the productive marriage of the two disciplines, practical and academic (such as the Bauhaus model), resentment towards Cultural Studies – a significant component of education in art and design – is common; not just amongst students but also among the staff who teach these core subject areas, such as the tutor interviewed in this study. The main objective of this research is to investigate how this ‘alienation’ could be reduced and how Cultural and Historical Studies, as a latecomer, can be better accommodated and integrated into overall art and design education.

In order to examine this alienated relationship more closely, it is necessary to focus on a more specific sample that represents this divide. For practical reasons, the BA (Hons) course in ‘Fashion Photography’ at London College of Fashion was chosen to investigate the position of Cultural and Historical Studies. The first sentence in the *Course Handbook* for the 2014-15 academic year explains this course as follows:

With its synergy between theory-based and practice-based approaches to contemporary fashion image making, this course is the first of its kind offering you the unique opportunity to study fashion photography as a practical and cultural discipline (UAL, 2014a, p.5).

In addition, the handbook lists 8 major learning outcomes for the course as a whole, in which the fifth one unambiguously relates to Cultural and Historical Studies and its significance for students’ practice. Students are expected to gain ‘an ability to situate practice within cultural and historical contexts and debates’ (UAL, 2014a, p.6). It thus seems, according to the *Course Handbook* (the crucial document binding the course with the students), that there is a strong relationship between theory and practice. It could also be said that theory is given priority by being mentioned first in the course introduction. That this is only in theory – if you excuse the pun – is clear when one looks at the course more closely.

Closer examination of the BA (Hons) Fashion Photography course description reveals that theory is a minor component of its structure. If we observe, for example, the tasks and units the students need to undertake in order to complete the final third year, stage 3, the promised balance of theory and practice seems entirely undermined. Students have two key units, one called the 'Cultural and Historical Studies Dissertation' rated at 40 credits (UAL, 2014b, p.1), and the other is the 'Final Major Project' worth 60 credits (UAL, 2014c, p.1). The 'Final Major Project' unit takes place in terms 2 and 3, preceded by a unit entitled 'Research Planning' in term 1, bearing another 20 credits. The Research Planning unit has nothing to do with research for theory, instead, it is purely dedicated to photographic practice (unless of course, one is satisfied that this type of research is implicitly theoretical): revealing that the relationship is far from balanced (UAL, 2014a, p.7). Therefore, for students to obtain 120 credits and pass stage 3 (at level 6), in total 80 credits are attributed through practical work and 40 through theoretical; effectively making theory only half as important as practice.

This credit related comparison of theory and practice on the BA (Hons) Fashion Photography course clearly demonstrates that, at an institutional level, practical work is favoured over theoretical to quite a significant scale. More visibly, the language used to define these units hints at a marginalisation of theory within the symbolic world of this course. The fact that one project is entitled 'Final' and 'Major', implicitly speaks volumes to both students and staff. The implications of such language can be dramatic, as indicated when an interviewed third year student explained (in jest) that 'Final Major Project' sounds as intimidating as 'the end of the world', while 'dissertation' is some sort of 'sweet dessert', an added meal to the main course. It is thus clear that the equality of theory and practice suggested in the *Course Handbook 2014-15* does not exist, but that within the course, the two subjects know their places. It is practice that holds its ground as a native, keeping theory as the foreign 'other' within the structure of the course – both institutionally and symbolically.

This positioning of theory, and Cultural and Historical Studies as its representative subject, within art and design education – and on the BA (Hons) Fashion Photography course in particular – gave rise to the main research objective of this project: to explore how to lessen the alienation of theory and enable its firmer integration within a course. As previously discussed, it is immediately evident that this 'otherisation' of theory is both institutional and symbolic. As teaching is of greater interest and concern, this project focuses on the symbolic yet seemingly innate rejection of theory within this particular course. It is thus the 'culture' of Cultural Studies that needs investigating within this environment.

The most pertinent research questions that have crystallised prior to and during the research process are:

1. Why are students often completely petrified by the subject 'Cultural and Historical Studies'? (As an interviewed member of staff who teaches photographic practice claimed.)
2. Why does it take so long for students to understand the relevance of theory and this subject to their photographic practice? (As an interviewed alumnus claimed: she only understood what Cultural and Historical Studies were, once she had submitted her dissertation in her final year.)

Proceeding from these first two questions, the final question asks how to then lessen the alienation of theory and enable its firmer integration in the course, or more generally:

3. How to bring the culture of Cultural Studies closer to students' art and design practice?

Methodology: interviews, theory and execution

This study attempts to answer these 3 research questions in order to design concise and practical strategies that can be implemented as of next academic year, with a view to reducing the alienation of theory. Its aim in the first instance, is to reduce the distance between the subject and students and secondly, to help students understand the benefits of theory for their work and careers, sooner rather than later. The main aim is thus to develop a better 'culture' of Cultural Studies, in the process of delivering this subject.

Considering the scope and timescale of this study, the research was undertaken on a micro-level. I opted to avoid well-known research frameworks, precisely because my background is in teaching those well-trodden models. It was more challenging – especially in relation to my own learning – to explore new avenues in constructing knowledge. For this reason, the decision was made to defend theory with theory, and to explore the culture in question theoretically. In this way, I would position myself closer to those students whose alienation from theory I aimed to reduce. Research in this study was therefore theoretical, exploratory and the methodological approach, qualitative, in the form of face-to-face interviews. Through this qualitative approach, I intended to accumulate data based on specific, individual experiences of teaching, from the perspective of those who experience it and those with collegial interest in the quality of its delivery, in the context of one specific course within London College of Fashion.

The research consisted of 4 semi-structured interviews. The interviewees agreed to be recorded and every effort was made to make them feel comfortable and fully aware that they could stop the interview and recording at any point. The interviewees were briefed on the nature of the project in advance, in order to reduce any anxiety, as well as for ethical concerns. Every effort was made for the interviewees to feel secure, so they could provide uninhibited testimonies about their experience of Cultural and Historical Studies. This approach was adopted in order to gain detailed information about individual experiences and the feelings of participants, on both sides of teaching. The aim was to observe the 'culture' of Cultural Studies from perspectives so far unknown to the researcher. As Susan Dunne emphasises in her classic work on this method, 'interviewing offers a privileged glimpse into the lives of other people whose lifestyle and experiences may be totally different from our own' (1995, p.1).

The 4 interviewees were chosen in order to explore and represent three distinctly different stages of study. They included a first year and third year student, as well as an alumnus and, from the other side of the symbolic divide, a member of staff who teaches practice (as opposed to theory). The interviewees are henceforward referred to by their role in relation to the course. As an approach, an interview format inevitably had a number of limitations, starting with an insurmountable but productive limitation that was epitomised in the learning process of a researcher who was using an unfamiliar method. In relation to this approach, Dunne explains that 'good interviewing like everything else comes with time and practice' (1995, p.75).

As the intention was to avoid theoretical frameworks and restrictions prior to the interviews, it was necessary to seek theoretical concepts for systematising and analysing data post factum. One of the obvious choices here was Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss' 'grounded theory' (2008 [1967]), as well as related concepts of 'Symbolic Interactionism' and

'phenomenography' (Aldiabat and Le Navenec, 2011). As mentioned above, the analysis of each interview was focused on the symbolic language and exchange within the culture of Cultural and Historical Studies, as it exists on the BA (Hons) Fashion Photography course at London College of Fashion. In order to analyse this symbolic language, theories of Symbolic Interactionism were used to analyse the collected data. Khaldoun Aldiabat and Carole-Lynne Le Navenec explain:

The first assumption of Symbolic Interactionism indicates that human beings live in a symbolic world of learned meanings. To illustrate further, human beings are distinguished from other creatures by their ability to function in a symbolic world. (Aldiabat and Le Navenec, 2011, p.1069)

The reason why a definition of the symbolic world has been drawn from Aldiabat and Le Navenec as opposed to other theories, is because their work demonstrates that 'the interpretive tradition of Symbolic Interactionism' is very close to the tradition of grounded theory (2011, p.1063). In addition, Symbolic Interactionism relies on the theoretical proposition of grounded theory, 'to discover what is actually happening in the symbolic world of the participants' (Aldiabat and Le Navenec, 2011, p.1069).

This framework of grounded theory was applied to the data collected by interviews in order to make sense of them and understand participants' attitude towards Cultural Studies. Collected data was first analysed through the perspective of classic grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss (2008 [1967]). By using their 'coding paradigm', the idea was that 'theoretical insights about the domain under scrutiny would "emerge" directly from the data if and only if researchers free themselves from any previous theoretical knowledge' (Glaser cited in Kelle, 2005). All data from the 4 interviews was 'coded' by selecting very different interviewees, including a member of staff who is critical of Cultural and Historical Studies. A conscious effort was made to throw the researcher's pre-conceptions off-balance. The idea was to create a qualitative analysis by, in Paulo Freire's words, engaging in 'dialogue with the people about their view and ours' (1993, p.77). It is also important to add that, as Udo Kelle explains, in recent decades 'Grounded Theory has made considerable progress in overcoming the naive empiricism of the emergence talk' (2005). For this reason, the concepts of 'abductive' (or retroductive) inference, of 'empirical content' (or falsifiability) and the concept of 'corroboration' were also taken into account when analysing data; bearing in mind that credible corroboration can only happen when designated strategies are tested in teaching practice.

One of the first limitations encountered by this study has to do with this chosen and so far specifically singular, theoretical approach, which would ideally be complemented with a whole spectre of approaches. In Kelle's words, it is necessary, in order to validate and corroborate the findings of this study further, 'to look for alternative concepts which are suited better to capture the investigated phenomena,' and hence rely more on 'theoretical pluralism' (2005).

Another inevitable limitation of this study, relates to the methodological approach and its execution. Primarily, this concerns the number of participants. If this number could have been larger then the conclusion would certainly be more encompassing. A larger sample of participants would also enable a quantitative study, with the possibility of a more statistical result, to supplement the qualitative data gathered. Research on this topic may well continue in future, as the subject requires longer-term monitoring of student experience in order to provide more accurate answers to the third and effectively main, research question – how to

bring the culture of Cultural Studies closer to students' art and design practice. The corroboration and validation of the proposed methods will henceforth take place in further research and teaching practice. This practice would rely on experiences supplied by more participants than the 4 core interviewees whose answers have been analysed in this study.

Analysis: feedback from interviewees

It is telling that the 4 interviewees who took part in this research project all agreed on one key principle: that to study photography as a craft – on only a practical level – is entirely unacceptable. These practical skills are an important learning outcome of the BA (Hons) Fashion Photography course and involve learning how to use production and post-production equipment, deal with a range of lighting situations and so forth. Even the member of staff, who championed teaching in the studio and was very critical of Cultural and Historical Studies, stated that he would not be interested in teaching on an entirely craft-based course. All 4 interviewees unanimously agreed that studying the technology of making images devoid of any understanding of the culture of making and reading images, would be futile and disappointing and make for an uninviting educational programme, especially at this level. Regardless of such enthusiasm for the wider 'culture' surrounding photography, the interviewees did not express ideas about how this culture of and around image making ought to be delivered. All 4 participants agreed that in first year, students seem to be entirely confounded by their experience of Cultural Studies in a way that can have lasting consequences for study of the subject in subsequent years of the course.

During the interview dialogues a number of points emerged that expose various issues stemming from students' first encounter with Cultural Studies. In their first term, students attend a unit preparing them for Cultural Studies that is taught within their studio environment, 'Introduction to Study in Higher Education' (ISHE). In their second term, they then proceed to have 'Introduction to Cultural and Historical Studies' (ICHS) taught in the different – and mostly understood as 'alien' environment – of the classroom/lecture theatre. Students, as attested by feedback from all 4 interviewees, also often complain about 'repetition' of topics over the two units, which cover similar ground, yet, each is worth 20 credits (UAL, 2014a, p.7). In addition, as the member of staff pointed out, students are confused not only as to why they are doing something very similar again, but also about why they have to travel to another department on another campus – to this 'alien planet' – to hear it all over again. Evidently there is an organisational issue and staff need to discuss the curricula of both units in detail. However, such issues and their resolution are beyond the scope of this investigation. In an exploration of whether there is something wrong with the culture of Cultural Studies, first year teaching experiences are a crucial point, at the root of this problem, arising from the delivery of this unit. All the interviewees, in their own ways, referred to it.

Teaching of practical image making on BA (Hons) Fashion Photography is somewhat informal and immediate, yet, by contrast Cultural Studies is taught using more traditional methods. When 'Introduction to Cultural Studies' starts at the beginning of the second term, many students feel as if they are 'back to school'. This is due to the format of lectures and seminars, in which students feel as if they are being 'talked to' or 'talked at', increasing the distance between students and the teachers. The Cultural Studies planet is thus 'alien' as it operates through a format that is distant. This environment coupled with the theoretical content, leaves students feeling intimidated by the subject. This environmental factor explains one aspect of the first research question, regarding student fear of Cultural Studies and indirectly feeds into the second question, about student perception of the relevance of the entire endeavour.

To resolve – or at least address – the problem of course delivery, it is important to lessen the traditional approaches to ‘academic’ teaching utilised in Cultural and Historical Studies, so that learning structures resemble those of studio teaching. Interviewed parties did not object to lectures per se, but a restructure could be accomplished by excluding them initially, while maintaining the format of speaker and listener. Interview responses also revealed that seminar culture is particularly problematic, indicating they should be completely re-organised to formally operate as a ‘studio-crit’ instead of a traditional classroom lesson. In this way, theory itself could be introduced as practice, which would lessen its alienation and respond to the issues of intimidation raised by the first research question. Restructuring the format of teaching could also potentially blur the boundary between theory and practice and undermine the somewhat unhelpful and ever-potential binary opposition between the two.

In practice, an alternative lesson structure for teaching Cultural Studies on the BA (Hons) Fashion Photography course could be organised in the following way. In first year, students first introduce themselves to their peers in studio sessions by showing their visual and creative work. The first lecture in the Cultural Studies unit reflects on the notion of ‘identity’ and could be tied to this first practical session. By integrating approaches used in Cultural Studies students can talk about their own identity, how it guided them to produce this work and what this explicitly or implicitly represents. This would then extend into the second week to allow them to talk about the contexts in which the work was produced. In the third session, a discussion or synthesis of the two concepts in relation to their work would be initiated. After such an introduction to Cultural Studies, it would then make sense to start breaking down a number of their own personal contexts into the generic concepts that we usually teach, such as subcultures, ethnicity, class, race, gender, sexuality and so forth. In this way, understanding of these concepts and learning would be organic and recognisable from experience, rather than abstract, alien and theoretical. Instead of delivering the key theoretical concepts week-by-week from an elevated platform, in a linear fashion, we would enable students to make presentations about their context, through which they explain their own interests, aims and identities. These would then be contextualised within the standardised concepts that we teach and students would ultimately choose to research concepts that they see as relevant. This relevance would not be hypothetical; hopefully it would emerge during the process of this re-organised learning and reveal to them in a meaningful way, what these concepts are actually about.

The model and restructure described here, propose a ‘theory of semblance’ in teaching art and design. This theory is modelled on the tradition of art and design schools by reiterating the craftsman, the apprentice and the studio/workshop as the site of learning. Such practical environments need to include theory, taught and delivered in a similar manner to practice, thus creating more informal, inclusive and direct frameworks for teaching Cultural Studies. The framework created by this atmosphere, resembling the studios where students’ work is discussed, would be more productive than traditional relationships where the tutor acts as a loudspeaker, enunciating a set quantum of knowledge that needs to be relayed in class. Students’ ‘fear’ of Cultural and Historical Studies could be reduced, primarily because the cultures of teaching practice and theory would come to more closely resemble each other. One cannot forget that ‘crits’ are often perceived as an equally as intimidating forum, but this awareness does not undermine the fact that, when taught in a traditional way, Cultural and Historical Studies tends to make students feel like they are back in school: a place they thought they had left for a more challenging atmosphere.

Conclusion

This research paper has explored the culture of Cultural Studies on the BA (Hons) Fashion Photography course at LCF. By exploring how this subject is taught, it has considered student anxiety around this subject; delayed student perception of the relevance of theory to their photographic practice; and alternative learning atmospheres that might enable an exchange of contexts, from practical work into theoretical discussion. If we allow for alternative contexts of encounter to emerge through student learning as they introduce themselves in the first year of the degree, the fear of Cultural Studies, its alien position and perception of it as irrelevant may be significantly reduced.

Though a number of other aspects were highlighted by the responses gathered during these research interviews, the research exposed one very specific aspect of how this problem could be addressed within the teaching curriculum of the BA (Hons) Fashion Photography course. The member of staff had a number of suggestions, although these were mainly to do with organisational changes within LCF. The theory of semblance, as a guiding principle, offers ideas that could be implemented in teaching as soon as the new academic year starts. Testing this concept in my future teaching practice is the best means to evaluate whether such an intervention is constructive. Cultural and Historical Studies provide students with a broader understanding of contemporary culture than more streamlined specialised subject areas. Cultural Studies thus contributes towards UAL's *Strategy 2015-2022*, directly affecting Strategic Area 3, which 'requires us to place UAL at the centre of the debate about the future' of taught disciplines, by 'creating closer connections with other disciplines, recognising the increasingly hybrid nature of arts, design, fashion and communication and their impact on other fields' (UAL, 2015).

Note

Participant comments are presented with full permission of the individuals concerned.

References

- Aldiabat, K. M. and Le Navenec, C. (2011) 'Philosophical roots of classical grounded theory: its foundations in symbolic interactionism', *The Qualitative Report*, 16(4). Available at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol16/iss4/> (Accessed: 22 June 2016).
- Cousin, G. (2009) *Researching learning in higher education: an introduction to contemporary methods and approaches*. London: Routledge.
- Dunne, S. (1995) *Interviewing techniques for writers and researchers*. London: A&C Black.
- Freire, P. (1993) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Translated by M.B. Ramos. London: Penguin Books.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (2008 [1967]) *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. New Brunswick; London: Aldine Transaction.
- Kelle, U. (2005) "'Emergence" vs. "forcing" of empirical data? A crucial problem of "grounded theory" reconsidered', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research / Forum: Sozialforschung*, 6(2), Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/467/1000> (Accessed: 18 July 2016).

Kill, R. (2005) 'Imperialist legacy or academic strategy? Resistance to writing in undergraduate art education', *Discourse power resistance: global issues, local solutions conference*. University of Plymouth, 5-7 April.

Kvale, S. (1996) *InterViews*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

MacDonald, S. (2004) *The history and philosophy of art education*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press.

Reed, B. I. (2006) 'Phenomenography as a way to research the understanding by students of technical concepts', *Technological Innovation and Sustainability conference*. Núcleo de Pesquisa em Tecnologia da Arquitetura e Urbanismo (NUTAU), Sao Paulo, Brazil. Available at: http://www.academia.edu/1122550/Phenomenography_as_a_way_to_research_the_understanding_by_students_of_technical_concepts (Accessed: 22 June 2016).

Silverman, D. (2007) *Interpreting qualitative data: methods for analyzing talk, text and interaction*. 3rd edn. London: SAGE.

University of the Arts London (2016a) *Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design: about CSM*. Available at: <http://www.arts.ac.uk/csm/about-csm/> (Accessed: 22 June 2016).

University of the Arts London (2016b) *London College of Fashion: our history*. Available at: <http://www.arts.ac.uk/fashion/about/history/> (Accessed: 22 June 2016).

University of the Arts London (2015) *Strategy 2015-22: transformative education for a creative world*. Available at: <http://www.arts.ac.uk/media/arts/about-ual/strategy-and-governance/documents/university-strategy/UAL-Strategy-2015-22.pdf> (Accessed: 22 June 2016).

University of the Arts London (2014a) *Course handbook 2014-15: BA (Hons) Fashion Photography 2014-15*. London: London College of Fashion.

University of the Arts London (2014b) *Unit handbook 2014-15. Cultural and historical studies dissertation, BA (Hons) Fashion Photography*. London: London College of Fashion.

University of the Arts London (2014c) *Unit handbook 2014-15. Final major project, BA (Hons) Fashion Photography*. London: London College of Fashion.

Biography

Dr Vlastimir Sudar is an Associate Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at LCF, teaching on a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate courses. He obtained his PhD in Film Studies at the University of St Andrews in 2007. He has published widely on a number of topics within this academic field, including his monograph 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Political Dissident', published by Intellect in 2013. He also writes on film for popular magazines, and regularly contributes articles to 'Sight and Sound'.